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homemakers' chat
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U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Monday, April 13, 1942

SUBJECT: "GROWING YOUR OWN SEASONINGS." Information from plant scientists of the U. S. Department of Agriculture.

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In ordinary times a home herb garden is mostly a pleasant hobby. In ordinary times no housewife really needs to grow plants for seasoning and flavoring food, because she can find on the grocer's shelf so many spices and seasonings all packaged and ready to use. She can go into almost any grocery store and buy seasonings from the far ends of the earth for a few cents. In fact, at ordinary prices she often finds it cheaper to buy her seasonings than to try to grow them herself.

But in wartime, as in pioneer days, the situation may be different. She may find that growing her own seasonings, as well as her own foods, may be both wise and thrifty. Our pioneer grandmothers, you know, grew all their own herbs. They had to grow their own, or go without seasoning for the foods they served their families. Back in pioneer days ships were not yet bringing to these shores pepper from Java; cinnamon from Ceylon; cloves from East Africa and Madagascar and ginger from China or Jamaica or West Africa. And now in these wartime days, ships have more important cargoes than spices and seasonings.

But that doesn't mean that seasonings for home meals are no longer important. Good seasoning is as important as ever in making foods delicious to eat. Every mother knows that the way to make children and husbands eat the food they need is to make it taste so good they can't resist. And every mother knows that seasoning often gets results faster than coaxing or lecturing about what's "good for you." Seasoning is especially important in making low-cost dishes appetizing. It may be the very makings of stews and pot roasts, soups, and chowders, hash and sauces. These dishes are not likely to grow tiresome to the family if you season them carefully, in different ways.

Well, these are some of the reasons why you may be wise this spring to set aside a corner of your victory garden for growing savory herbs for seasoning. Another good reason is that the flavor of freshly picked herbs is tops, and you can have this top flavor if you grow your own. You may well take a little extra time to learn not only how to grow your own seasonings, but also how to use them in making home meals extra good. Try using home-grown seasonings instead of the familiar seasonings you've been buying all these years. You have your choice of a large number of hardy herbs, easy to grow. Many of them are perennials, so, once started, they'll keep coming up year after year. Some of the herbs like parsley, chives, and marjoram, you can take up in the fall and grow indoors to have fresh seasonings all winter.

How much space in the garden do you need for growing herbs? Plant scientists of the U. S. Department of Agriculture say that a space 10 by 12 feet--or, at most, 10 by 20 feet--will supply all the seasonings for an average size family. The flavor of herbs goes a long way. You don't need to put in many plants of any one kind.

A out the soil: Any rich, well-drained garden soil is right for growing herbs, but you'll be wise to prepare the soil especially well and fertilize it well before you put in your herbs this spring. Since many herbs are perrennials and will be coming up other years without much soil preparation, they'll benefit from a good start. Plow or spade the ground to a depth of 10 or 15 inches, and then work in bone meal and well-rotted manure to the full depth. Use about 10 pounds of bone meal for a plot 10 by 20 feet, and work in plenty of well-rotted manure. Be sure every bit of soil is fine and evenly mixed with the fertilizer.

Another point about an herb garden: Be sure it has enough sun. Some herbs - like mint and thyme may need only half sun; others like chives and tarragon need full sun; all herbs must have at least some sun to thrive. Many of the sweet herbs like marioram and basil originally came from the warm countries of Southern Europe

and the Orient. They need warmth, sunshine and moist soil. Be sure to plant them after frost, or to start them indoors.

Here's a tip about the arrangement of your herb garden. Lay it out so that the annuals are on one side and the perennials on the other. Then, next year, when you dig up the soil for planting annuals, you won't disturb the perennials.

Suppose now that you want perhaps 10 or a dozen of the most useful herbs for your 10 by 12 herb-space in the garden. Suppose you want herbs that you can grow easily, and use in a large number of different dishes. Well, here's a suggestion for a cook's dozen for seasoning. On the annual side of your garden, plant: parsley, summer savory, basil for its clovelike flavor; sweet marjoram, and dill. (Many cooks and herb gardeners would add 2 more annuals to that list--nasturtium and anise.) On the perennial side you might plant: sage, mint, thyme, chives and tarragon. With just these few plants you will have a wide variety of seasonings for adding zest to everything from soup to dessert--from sandwiches to fruit beverages.

You know--almost every housewife knows how to use parsley and mint and sage in seasoning foods. You probably know too that you use the grasslike leaves of chives when you want a delicate onion flavor. But you may not know how good chopped marjoram and basil can make scrambled eggs and omelet, or soup, meat stew and stuffings. You may not know that the fresh leaves of summer savory are delicious in green salad and salad dressing as well as in sausage, lamb stew and hash. You may never have tried thyme--fresh or dried--in soup, and stuffing, and chowder. Well, this summer try growing your own seasonings, and you'll have some new taste treats for your family. Very often you can make an economy dish taste like a million with just a dash of home-grown herbs.

For more information on growing herbs for the kitchen garden write to the U. S. Department of Agriculture.

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